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ABSTRACT

Communicating effectively with parents and the wider community is important to schools for a number of reasons. Community members are more supportive of schools that they feel they understand, and the significant role parents play in their children's education can only be affected by the schools if effective communication exists. Four methods of communication are especially useful with groups of parents: newsletters, open houses, handbooks, and parent organizations. Communicating with parents individually may involve parent-teacher conferences, home visits, interviews, and phone calls or letters. Efforts to inform parents should be continued through their children's secondary school years because parental interest remains high even though their active participation is often reduced. Effective use of the kinds of communication covered here can serve as a starting point for broader school-community relations efforts. These efforts include soliciting citizen involvement as volunteers in the schools and developing partnerships with community businesses. Resource materials providing useful information on various aspects of school-community relations are cited throughout this publication. (PGD)

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Improving Home-School Communications

Edward E. Gotts, Richard F. Purnell

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

Improving Home-School Communications

by
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and
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Introduction

Today few would argue with the premise that a partnership of home and school provides the best education for boys and girls. Nevertheless, the conditions of public education in this country have not always been conducive to a partnership effort. With the increasing professionalization of teaching, parents have been told to leave instruction to the "experts." In fact, some parents have been made to feel that they might thwart their children's academic progress or even damage their psyches if they tried to help their children with their school work. As a result of such attitudes parents were placed in a spectator role, to be seen but not heard. It is little wonder then that parents appear to be disinterested and unwilling to be involved in the school program.

However, since World War II events outside the schools were moving in new directions that would challenge the power of educators as experts when it came to children and their learning. Educational levels were rising for the entire population. Where once high school graduation was the goal for all citizens, now a college education was becoming essential for entry into an expanding array of business, professional, and technical careers. New occupational fields emerged, many of them requiring a level of preparation surpassing that of the teaching profession. These better educated parents began to be more assertive in their demands on the schools. Sometimes teachers felt intimidated by these highly educated parents who, when dissatisfied, might go over their heads, including making contact with school board members. The balance of power was shifting toward the home.

Another development influencing the balance of power in school-home relations since the 1960s was the civil rights movement and the subsequent move-

ment for women's rights. Educators had to begin weighing carefully whether their policies and actions – no matter how well intentioned – may be judged by others as discriminatory and therefore subject to litigation.

Several social commentators have pointed out that we live in a post-industrial era – an information society. This is altering our ways of communicating. No longer is top-down communication acceptable. Leaders at all levels must be open and responsive to their various constituencies and clientele. Teachers can no longer expect that their authority will be accepted readily by parents.

The foregoing changes in the balance of power have not gone unnoticed. Educators are beginning to realize that good school-home relations depend on mutual respect and appreciation for one another's contributions. M. Donald Thomas, former superintendent of the Salt Lake City Schools and a leading advocate of shared governance in education, addresses this issue in fastback 120 *Parents Have Rights, Too!* (1978). This remains a practical and warmly presented treatment on sharing power between school and home.

Educators working in the school-family area have also found compelling a repeated research finding: the effect of the home environment on student achievement exceeds the effect both of schooling and of measured student aptitude. Therefore, it is not merely politic to involve parents; it is essential to the goal of successfully advancing universal public education. The evidence for the effects of parent involvement on student performance will be considered more fully in the closing section of this fastback.

Improved school-family relations depend on effective communications. Our own research on the partnership of home and school has been a continuing search for communication strategies that work well in the context of the day-to-day operation of schools. This fastback is devoted to sharing what we have learned.

Communicating About Our Schools: The Right to Know

Citizens in our democracy have a fundamental right to know about those things in their communities that may affect their lives, and that right includes knowing about the business and operation of their schools. With the right to know comes the obligation to listen and be informed.

The right to know implies that schools have a responsibility to inform. How adequately are the schools performing this job? Parents with children in public school generally rate themselves as being better informed about the schools in their own communities than do adults with no children in school or with children attending other than public school. Yet even public school parents as a group do not consider themselves particularly well informed. Our own surveys reveal that urban schools do a more thorough job of communicating with parents than do rural and small-town schools. However, in rural and small towns parents have greater access to information through informal contact with school personnel outside of school. Also consider the fact that at present 80% of adults have no children of school age. Failure to communicate to these adults about what the schools are accomplishing and their needs could result in reduced support for schools in the future.

In communicating to parents and others, first it is necessary to consider what people want to know about the schools and the information sources they use. Usually they want to know about the major decisions of the school board and administration, the financial condition of the schools, the kinds and quality of educational programs offered, the results of their investment in schools, the special problems facing the schools, and opportunities for their involvement.

Parents receive their information mainly from their children and other school-based sources, while adults without children receive theirs primarily through the newspaper and television. Both groups wish to continue receiving information through their current sources but would welcome much more information directly from school staff.

Every school system should establish policy and guidelines for communicating with parents and other publics. Some aspects of communication will need to be handled at the district level, while others are more efficiently and directly handled at the building and classroom levels. The policy and guidelines should indicate what is expected at each level. The following resources will help in setting up a communications program.

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209, distributes *School Communication Workshop Kit* to assist districts in getting a communication program started. NSPRA also distributes other specialized publications and materials to help promote public knowledge of the schools. Another helpful publication is fastback 182 *School Public Relations: Communicating to the Community* by J. A. Kinder.

Parents and other citizens need to know the general public's attitudes and opinions about the schools. This information is available in the annual Gallup Polls of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, published each September in the *Phi Delta Kappan*. Phi Delta Kappa also distributes a program called *PACE (Polling Attitudes of Community on Education)*, which enables a school district to replicate the Gallup Poll on education locally.

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) collaborated in the development of *Community Survey Model for School Districts: Procedural Guide*. This guide may be ordered from AEL, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325. AEL also has developed specific procedures for surveying the condition of school-family relations at both school district and building levels.

Communicating with Parents as a Group

School-home communications may be for groups of parents or for individuals. Group communications are used when schools need to share information widely about their program, activity schedule, accomplishments, and needs. Individual communications are used when contacting parents on matters of academic progress and needs of individual students. Four methods of communication are especially useful with groups of parents: newsletters, open house, handbooks, and parent organizations.

Newsletters

The newsletter is an effective way to communicate general information to a wide audience. Our studies show that a quality newsletter is the single most effective way of reaching parents whose children attend a particular school building. For them, the message seems more personalized when it comes from "my child's school." On the other hand, a newsletter from the school board office serves better as a public information source for the general community.

Our studies show that a large majority of parents read and act on the information provided in newsletters. They are upset if news of school events comes too late. A welcome feature on the first page of the newsletter is a monthly calendar of upcoming events. Articles and news items should be prepared in a brief, clear style. They should be informative. Personal messages and viewpoints from school staff are welcome. The cover page might also include a box highlighting what is in the issue.

In laying out the newsletter pages use such visual devices as headlines, good spacing between items, and simple illustrations to make the newsletter more

appealing and to help the readers find what may interest them. Eye-catching illustrations called clip art are available in kits from Creative Art Productions, 22552 King Richard Court, Birmingham, MI 48010. Inexpensive collections of borders and clip art are available from Dover Publications, 31 East 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11501. Lettering stencils from an art supply shop round out the materials needed for preparing a professional looking product.

In our experience, in elementary schools the principal usually writes and edits the newsletter. In secondary schools any of a number of people may do this job: principal, vice principal, journalism or English teacher – whoever has the skills to organize information from many sources and write. In one high school we know, the head of the science department did the newsletter because she had the skills and was committed to school-family relations. In a large consolidated rural high school, journalism students accepted the challenge of communicating with parents, under the sponsorship of a teacher. In one favored suburban high school, a group of volunteer parents regularly prepares a newsletter with the principal's advice and blessing.

No matter who contributes to the newsletter, the editor must have the final say about content and quality. The editor's maxim should be: "To you it may be just a newsletter. To me it's my school's reputation." It is that; it can set the tone for all other school-home communications. While it must not oversell the school's strengths and virtues, the newsletter must be positive. Many may contribute to the newsletter, but it should have only one editor. Through a newsletter, staff, parents, students, and community should receive a unified message.

Additional ideas on preparing and using newsletters appear in Edward E. Gotts' "Communicating Through Newsletters in Secondary Schools" in *A Resource Notebook for Improving School-Home Communications* (1984), edited by Oralie McAfee and available from the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325.

Open House

Open house is an occasion to show off the school, including student work, facilities, instructional staff, equipment, materials, and so on. It works best if held once a year at a time with few schedule conflicts and when weather is likely to be favorable. Parents at both elementary and secondary levels are

more likely to attend open house if: their child is to perform or be featured in some way, there is an opportunity to examine student work and talk with teachers, the time is convenient, notice is sent well in advance, and they have been involved in some way in the preparations.

The open house allows for much creative initiative by those who plan it, but it is well to have a stated purpose or unifying theme. It may, for example, be billed as a "Back to School Day (Night)" for parents and other friends of the school. This provides an excellent opportunity for parents to experience directly what the children are learning and how the instruction is conducted. A science fair is another popular focus. We observed one highly successful open house in an urban high school where display booths featured careers and special instructional program activities. The booths were staffed by students, parents, and other volunteers. The program combined characteristics of an open house and a local fair, making it highly attractive to the community.

Sometimes the open house is combined with parent-teacher conferences. The problem with this format is that the schedule may become too full and may even be confusing. The two may be combined more easily at the elementary level with self-contained classrooms. At the secondary level, the confusion factor may outweigh the benefits, unless the open house is set up as a browsing time for parents who are waiting for their conferences to begin. Even without scheduled conferences, time for person-to-person conversation is fully in keeping with the operation of an open house.

An open house may also be used to orient students and parents to the several transition levels in school life, when children enter kindergarten, first grade, middle schools and high school. Most early childhood teachers already do a nice job of handling the transition for young children. It is the transition from elementary to secondary school that is stressful for many students and parents; yet many secondary schools do not provide much assistance to them. However, good transition models do exist at the secondary level.

One model begins by holding an outreach meeting for parents at each of the elementary schools that feeds into a particular junior high or middle school. Preferably, this takes place late in the spring before the children are to be promoted. A delegation from the receiving school comes to present an overview of the new experiences, procedures, expectations, and standards that the students will encounter. The receiving school then invites both parents and students to an orientation open house at the secondary school later that spring.

At that time teachers and student leaders all help conduct orientation sessions and tours of the building. Incoming students and parents attend some sessions jointly and others separately. The hosts distribute handouts that may be studied over the summer months.

Whatever approach is taken to the open house, it is a large undertaking that must be well planned and publicized. Further assistance can be located in *Open House in Your School, A Guide to Planning and Conducting an Effective School Open House*, published by the National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.

Handbooks

Many elementary principals use handbooks as a means of communicating general information about their schools to parents, school personnel, and the broader community. In writing the handbook the principal should tailor it to the characteristics of the particular school and its neighborhood setting. The handbook may also include statements reflecting the principal's personal views of educating children and of ways that home and school can work together to accomplish their shared educational mission. *A Resource Notebook for School-Home Communications*, mentioned earlier, has a section called "Communicating Through the Home-School Handbook: Guidelines for Principals," which discusses how to prepare a quality handbook or to improve an existing one. It also offers guidelines for using the handbook effectively.

At the secondary level, handbooks often include a behavior and dress code and a guide to the secondary curriculum. They are useful for both students and parents. The contents may consist of a welcome, rules for conduct, routine procedures and regulations, information for using particular services and facilities, and the names of student and administrative officers. In many schools the conduct and dress code has been developed by a committee of school personnel, parents, and students. Uniform codes developed by this means convey to students that there is school-community consensus about what is expected and what the consequences are if the code is not observed. The literature on school improvement has documented the relationship between the existence of conduct codes and improved student behavior.

The section of the handbook devoted to a guide to the curriculum may resemble a college catalogue with descriptions of programs of study, courses offered,

graduation requirements, grading and attendance policy, and information on student organizations. Many questions from students and parents can be answered by referring them to this section of the handbook. Thus teachers and counselors can spend their time with special requests from students and parents.

Parent Organizations

The PTA and PTO are the most familiar schoolwide organizations that bring families and schools together. Numerically, across the country these groups are much more active at the elementary level. At the secondary level these groups often include students and are called PTSA. Parent advisory councils (PACs) are more recent arrivals on the scene. They concern themselves mainly with advising on federally supported programs. PACs have moved increasingly into areas of decision making traditionally controlled by professionals. Likewise, the national PTA has reversed its long-standing policy of avoiding involvement in areas of curriculum and decision making. All of the foregoing organizations operate at building, district, state, and national levels.

The one concern that surfaces continually when these groups meet is meeting attendance. A reliable source of ideas for better meetings is *PTA Today* magazine, published seven times a year. For PACs, we recommend the Advisory Council Packets available from the Institute for Responsive Education, 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215.

Other Media Approaches to School-Home Communications

Phi Delta Kappa distributes a school-family relations program called *Parents' Record of Educational Progress* (PREP). This program uses some of the familiar features of the "baby book" format. It provides information on learning and development at various stages and provides forms for parents to maintain records of their child's educational progress from ages 2 through 18.

Other print materials available from a variety of sources too numerous to list here include pamphlets on educational testing, the privacy act and access to student records, bumper stickers to encourage parents to read to their children, and newspaper inserts telling parents how to use the paper in various ways to broaden their child's education and how to create a home environment that encourages learning. In addition to print materials, some interesting experimentation is being conducted with television and radio spot announcements directed to parents.

Communicating with Parents as Individuals

Newsletters and the other techniques described in the preceding section are effective ways to communicate with parents as groups. There are also many occasions when it is necessary to communicate with parents individually on such matters as academic progress and deficiencies, homework, attendance, scheduling, credits earned and needed, post-secondary plans, student behavior, and testing or screening for student placement.

Methods of individual communication include phone call, report card, formal conference, home visit, automatic calling device to notify of absence, and interviews. Individual communications may originate from the teacher, principal, or counselor. A discussion of the use of some of these methods follows.

Parent-Teacher Conference

This method is widely used at both elementary and secondary levels. Elementary parents are more likely to attend; secondary parents are less likely to attend unless there is a special problem. Parents of higher educational attainment are more likely to attend, irrespective of grade level. Many school systems place such importance on parent-teacher conferences that they are included in teacher contracts and are placed on the school calendar. If conferences are to be held on an as-needed basis, consideration has to be given to scheduling and teachers' time to conduct them.

The fact that conferences are so widely used may create the false sense that "there's really nothing to it." If they are to be used effectively, they must be carefully planned. The AEL publication cited earlier, *A Resource Notebook*

for School-Home Communications, contains guidelines collected from several sources. Also, fastback 132 *How Parent-Teacher Conferences Build Partnerships* is a good compact guide to this subject.

Home Visits

At one time visits were an expected part of every teacher's duties. Although less common today, in early childhood education the practice continues to be embraced enthusiastically. Home visits acquaint the teacher with the home environment and provide a more relaxed setting for discussing the same kinds of issues that are covered in a parent-teacher conference. Home visits require special courtesies and considerations, which many school personnel feel poorly equipped to handle. Survival skills for home visits are presented in *The Home Visitor's Kit* (1977), edited by Edward E. Gotts and published by Human Sciences Press. Home visits can be especially useful for showing parents how they can help with their child's learning in the home. Such assistance conveys to parents that they are partners in the learning process.

Interviews

Individual parents may express their views to a teacher, but many parents never express their concerns unless directly asked to do so. Schools need a systematic way to collect information from parents on a variety of topics. The interview is a way to do this.

We have used the interview method in working collaboratively with several principals in four county school systems. We chose the interview rather than a questionnaire because of better participation rates, greater flexibility, and more in-depth responses from parents. More than 90% of parents contacted were willing to be interviewed. Many seemed to welcome the opportunity to express themselves candidly about their schools.

Participating principals and superintendents found that they could use the interview data collected to improve their communication practices in the area of school-family relations. The interview technique was a way to start two-way communication. The interview procedures used are described in a technical report, *Interviews and Coding Procedures for Assessing School-Family Communications* (1982) by Edward E. Gotts and Beth Sattes, available from the Appalachian Educational Laboratory.

Occasions for Individual Communication

Student Behavior. Parents should be contacted about student behavior problems if they are serious enough to call for even mild disciplinary action. Overwhelmingly, parents state that they want to be promptly notified under these circumstances so that the behavior can be corrected. Prompt parent notification should be an established school policy, with guidelines spelling out when and what is to be done.

Absenteeism. The research on effective schools repeatedly has shown the correlation of regular attendance with student achievement. Further, a large body of research shows that poor attendance is associated with both school drop-out and the onset of delinquency. Prompt notification of student absences should be a matter of district policy, not only in the interest of the student but also to receive maximum reimbursement for schools that operate under state support formulas based on average daily attendance. Prompt notice is best accomplished by telephone.

Automatic dialing systems with a taped message are now being installed in many schools to complete these calls. One system is the Truant Educational Support System from Microlog Corporation, 4 Professional Drive, Gaithersburg, MD 20879. This system can also be used for many other school-family messages, such as announcing school closings, special events, and PTA meetings, or to inform parents that report cards are being distributed. Those interested in other exciting uses of the automatic telephone equipment can contact the "Parents in Touch" program, Indianapolis Public Schools, 901 Carrollton Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46202. Evidence shows improved attendance from efforts of this type, whether notice is made by personal phone call or by machine.

Academic Deficiency. Parents should be notified of student academic deficiency about midway through each grading period. This allows time for remediation and improvement before the grade appears on a report card. Parents want and appreciate this "second chance" notice. Often a teacher will follow up with a conference with the student and parents. Parents also need guidance on how to follow up on academic deficiency reports. The authors have prepared a single-page academic guidance sheet, "Helping Your Child," in two versions for elementary and secondary levels. The sheet may be used with interim grade reports and with the regular report card. The guidance sheets

have been positively received by parents in all schools where they have been tried. Parents state that the sheets help them understand how to analyze reasons behind the academic problem and how to take corrective action. Sample academic guidance sheets and instructions for their use appear in *A Resource Notebook for School-Home Communications* published by the Appalachian Educational Laboratory (AEL). Schools are granted permission from AEL to duplicate and use the academic guidance sheet forms.

Homework. Homework, if reviewed and graded by the teacher, results in increased achievement on standardized tests. Parents in a majority of U.S. homes spend time assisting with homework. This fact suggests that homework can be a productive channel for strengthening the school-home partnership. However, too often parents are asked or expected to help with homework without direction or assistance. To treat volunteer workers this way in any other context would lead to massive resignations. But parents keep trying, as best they can, because of their commitment to their children. Schools seem quick to pass policy to increase homework without recognizing that this is "faith without works" – faith that parents and students will somehow do their part without the school working with them to make homework a professionally guided and instructionally sound endeavor.

In our view, schools should review their homework policies to see that parents are partners in their children's education rather than a scapegoat when homework is not completed. For a fuller discussion of homework policy see fastback 218 *Homework – And Why* by David A. England and Joannis K. Flatley.

Coping with Discipline Problems. Life at school brings its daily problems: children squabble while waiting for the school bus; someone breaks into a student locker; one child threatens or intimidates another. Where can parents seek help with these kinds of problems at school? They cannot be settled by the principal alone. Solving discipline problems works best when a decentralized approach is used, according to studies conducted by the University of Wisconsin's Educational R & D Center. This means using everyone in the school to share the responsibility for solving discipline problems: janitors, food-service workers, student leaders, office staff, and bus drivers. Our surveys in a seven-state region demonstrate convincingly that school support staff feel inadequate to help with solving problems that arise between school and home but are highly receptive to receiving training in this area. They know

they need it because such problems are thrust upon them daily. Teachers, too, express a need for further training in handling disciplinary matters that are beyond the routine. Schools that use a shared approach to help solve problems of these types are most appreciated by parents and, in turn, receive high ratings for positive community relations.

Parent Involvement: Differences Between Elementary and Secondary Levels

Many educators have expressed concern about the decline in parent involvement with schools as children grow older. By the secondary years, many persons have remarked that the level of involvement approaches the point of disappearing altogether. Perhaps the problem is one of applying expectations of early childhood parent involvement, which are inappropriate for parents of older children.

At first glance, it may appear that parents' involvement declines as their children grow older. In fact, what is happening is that, as children grow older, parents change the nature of their involvement. Physical distance increases, as does time spent apart. Parents increasingly direct their interest toward their children's associates, recognizing the influence of peers in their children's life. Parents also show increased interest in their children's accomplishments as they relate to possible career choices and eventual independence. However, these changes do not signal a decrease in their emotional involvement. On the contrary; for example, the intense emotional interest parents show in their teenagers' dating behavior or grooming is clear evidence that emotional involvement remains high.

The nature of adolescence itself is another factor that influences the outward expression of parent involvement. Many teenagers are reluctant to be seen with their parents, particularly when the parent's presence may suggest to peers that the parent is checking on or being overly intrusive in their teenager's activities. Our interviews with many secondary school personnel and with parents of teenagers confirm that this attitude is prevalent among adolescents. Consequently, parents may stay away from school to avoid em-

barrassing their children. Furthermore, teachers may indirectly communicate this same message to parents who attend parent-teacher conferences and are greeted with such words as, "You didn't really need to come. Your child is doing all right." Or they hear remarks to the effect that the parents who need to be there never come. The same message is conveyed in either event: "You are not needed here!"

While there are differences in the involvement of parents at the elementary and secondary levels, there is no less need for communicating to parents. At the secondary level more personal contact may be necessary. For example, secondary educators have a responsibility to inform parents directly about academic deficiencies and behavior problems at the earliest possible time. Failure to involve parents when there is a serious problem results in anger, mistrust, and loss of confidence in the school. The secret at this level is "early warning."

Communication and Broader Community Relations

We began by stating the public has a right to be informed about their schools. We described how holding a school open house may be expanded into a community event. We showed how school newsletters and other media approaches can be used to ensure that both parents and other citizens are reached with certain common messages, including events at the school that are of interest to many: athletics, musical programs, drama, and science fairs. Effective use of these kinds of communication can serve as a starting point for broader school-community relations involving various types of partnerships.

Citizens can be interested in working as volunteers in schools. In addition to PTA/PTO, the Junior League and other local service organizations are continually seeking worthy community projects. Publications to help school staff develop volunteer programs are available from the National School Volunteer Program, 300 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. The National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410, Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, MD 21044, and the Institute for Responsive Education, 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, specialize in citizen involvement in schools. The Institute for Responsive Education has recently prepared a notebook for citizens who wish to become involved in the effective schools movement.

A school-business partnership is another avenue to explore. For more on these, see *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1984) and fastback 226 *How to Start a School/Business Partnership* by Carol O'Connell. If we were to consider partnership in a broader context, we should examine new developments in parent education described in the Education Commission of the States publi-

cation *Families and Schools: Implementing Parent Education* (1979). We would need to go beyond homework to consider other ways that parents can teach and otherwise support learning at home. Parent resource centers in schools and parent involvement in curriculum decision making would have to be considered. Finally, we would place inservice education in the middle of all this, because school personnel need updating for the many new challenges presented by the various types of education partnerships.

Parents have a right to know, and involvement is the best way for them to find out. And what are the results? When parents are involved in full partnership, academic achievement rises; student behavior is improved; school motivation increases; attendance becomes more regular; and community support is gained. Here we have considered how to get it all started. It begins with good school-home communications, which in turn leads to mutual respect and new forms of partnership to benefit the lives of boys and girls.

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